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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 TEGUCIGALPA 002380

SIPDIS

STATE FOR P, T, WHA, WHA/CEN, PM, AND INR/IAA  
NSC FOR SHANNON

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TAGS: PARM PREL MASS MCAP PBTS PINR HO

SUBJECT: HONDURAS READY TO MOVE FORWARD ON REGIONAL  
DISARMAMENT; WILL NOT NEGOTIATE BILATERALLY

REF: A. MANAGUA 2274  
B. TEGUCIGALPA 2022  
C. MANAGUA 2575  
D. MANAGUA 2585  
E. SECSTATE 249219  
F. MANAGUA 2659  
G. USDAO TEGUCIGALPA 041716Z SEP 03

Classified By: PolChief Francisco Palmieri;  
Reasons 1.5 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: According to Government of Honduras (GOH) officials, Honduras is still very inclined to move forward on regional disarmament, but remains insistent that the process proceed through established channels, particularly the Central American Security Commission (SICA), and that all the Central American (CENTAM) countries proceed in tandem. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) officials acknowledged that the current process is proceeding slowly, but strongly argued that it at least presents a viable roadmap that the CENTAMS can follow. Moreover, the Maduro Administration maintains they are much more concerned about trans-national security threats, such as organized crime and narco-terrorism, rather than excess military inventories, which they claim are not a major problem in Honduras. Apart from its vaunted F-5 fleet (of which only 7-8 out of 11 aircraft are operational), Honduras' armed forces are the smallest in the region and its weapons inventories among the most modest. As such, the Nicaraguan arms reduction initiative was not well received in Honduras (ref A). The GOH views the proposal as a means to divert attention from Nicaragua's excess Man Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS). Beyond that, the GOH feels that the Government of Nicaragua (GON) proposal lacks substance, and in its current form, actually sets back progress that has already been made through the SICA. Post will send translated synopsis of Nicaraguan proposal via septel. END SUMMARY

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Nicaraguan Arms Reduction Initiative  
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¶2. (S) The GOH takes issue with the Nicaraguan arms reduction initiative on many levels. Politically, GOH officials view the Nicaraguan proposal as grandstanding; offering nothing new, ignoring long-standing positions, and actually reopening important key elements (including agreed upon concepts, definitions, and reporting formats) from the existing agenda.

In essence, the MFA points out that it basically brings the whole process back to square one. The GOH believes the GON knows this and is suspicious that the true GON agenda is to undermine the disarmament process and deflect USG and regional attention away from its excess stocks of MANPADS. Moreover, the GOH remains concerned over the mixed signals being sent from the GON by its civilian leadership and military establishment. They cite numerous press statements by GON military leaders that seem to contradict elements of the GON proposal. GOH officials tell us that they have little confidence in negotiating with the GON civilian leadership, whom they feel will not be able to deliver on any agreement over the objections of the Nicaraguan military.

¶3. (S) Militarily, Honduras views MANPADS as a bilateral issue between the USG and the GON. Minister of Defense (MOD) Federico Breve has been emphatic that, while he supports a rationally balanced program of CENTAM arms control, the GOH will not sacrifice Honduras' fleet of F-5's on a bilateral basis (ref G). (COMMENT: The GOH understands the need to reduce MANPAD stocks in Nicaragua. However, the GOH feels that unfair pressure is being applied by the U.S. on Honduras. The MOD has made clear to EmbOffs, SecDef, and CJCS that the GOH will continue to resist any effort to couple its remaining fleet of F-5's for a reduction of Nicaraguan SA-7 stocks, which in his view are of little value against F-5's. END COMMENT)

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Beyond F-5's  
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¶4. (C) There is a clear divergence of views on regional disarmament. GOH military and diplomatic sources report that

Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Guatemala do not believe the disarmament process concerns them. A senior MFA official said El Salvador particularly views the process instead to be between the GOH and the GON over MANPADS and F-5's.

President Maduro and MOD Breve, in carefully nuanced public statements, have indicated the GOH remains ready to discuss its fleet of F-5's, but only as part of a regional discussion. GOH civilian leaders are also quick to point out that the Honduran military is considerably smaller than its neighbors, and that the fleet of F-5's go a long way toward countering its neighbors numerical superiority.

¶ 15. (C) President Maduro has repeatedly stated that military hardware in the region is excessive. However, Maduro feels strongly that time would be more productively spent concentrating on ways to improve CENTAM cooperation against trans-national threats such as organized crime, narco-terrorism, and kidnapping syndicates, which affect the entire region and pose significant threats to all CENTAM countries. The constant violation of CENTAM territory by narcotics traffickers is a particular area where Maduro would like to see increased regional cooperation. (COMMENT: Maduro's comments reflect the extent to which SOUTHCOM Combatant Commander General Hill's and WHA Deputy Assistant Secretary Fisk's initiatives on regional military integration have penetrated strategic thinking here. GOH officials have noted on numerous occasions that war between any of the CENTAM countries is now unthinkable as well as unsustainable. END COMMENT)

¶ 16. (S) Post notes that Honduras' over-rated fleet of F-5's should also be put in perspective. Honduras maintains a fleet of 10 F-5's at the Coronel Hector Caraccioli Moncada Air Base in La Ceiba on the Caribbean coast. Of these, only seven-to-eight are currently operational with a readiness rate of only 72 percent. The remaining fleet will deteriorate further because of a lack of spare parts, making it likely that within a few years Honduras will not be able to effectively deploy these assets. It is also highly improbable the GOH will invest scarce resources into replacing this fleet with more modern jet aircraft. Moreover, Honduran combat pilots train on these aircraft only one hour a month due to high fuel costs.

¶ 17. (C) COMMENT: While open to discussing disarmament issues on a regional basis, Honduran MFA and MOD officials express some exasperation and frustration that the GON has successfully convinced the USG to link MANPAD destruction to either a reduction in Honduras' F-5 inventory or a broader, and more politically tedious and difficult, regional arms balancing process. The bottom line is that Honduras will resist any effort to discuss disarmament issues on a bilateral basis, particularly with the GON. END COMMENT.  
Palmer